

Blue Dog Democrats grab the congressional wheel ^{*MM}

McIntyre among conservative coalition

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WASHINGTON — When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi faced scorn from fellow Democrats during a recent closed-door meeting for not moving more aggressively on Iraq, it was conservative Blue Dogs — her ideological opposites — who rose to defend her.

The unlikely support reflected an emerging dynamic in the House, where the 43 right-of-center fiscal hawks, including Reps. Heath Shuler and Mike McIntyre of North Carolina, are increasingly asserting their power, working to moderate the policies and image of a party with a liberal base and leaders to match.

The coalition's name is a play on yellow dog Democrats, an epithet that came into being in the 1920s to describe party loyalists in the South who, it was said, would vote for a yellow dog if it ran on the Democratic ticket. Democrats who said their moderate to conservative views had been "choked blue" by the party's liberal flank started referring to themselves as blue dogs and formed their group after Republicans swept control of the House in 1994.

With Democrats in charge again,

the Blue Dogs have played a key role in halting an emerging plan to place strict conditions on war funding. Their revolt helped beat back that proposal by Pelosi ally John Murtha, D-Pa. Leaders are now considering a watered-down version.

They started the year with a major victory, when Democrats adopted strict "pay-as-you-go" budget rules that Blue Dogs have advocated for years to block measures that would deepen the deficit.



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Soon after, their insistence that a catchall spending measure stay within strict budget limits helped Democrats pass the bill along with boosts for veterans, health research and education — handing the party its only substantive win so far this year.

The group's next major test is likely to come when Democrats look to pass a budget. Many in the party are pushing for tax increases to fund education, health and other priorities.

House leaders now see the support of the group — particularly its nine freshman members, whose victories over Republican incumbents in conservative districts helped to hand Democrats the House — as a prerequisite for any measure they



U.S. REP. MIKE MCINTYRE

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See DEMS, Page 8A

Rob. 3-8-07 pg. 1A

*Liberal wing is ^{*MM}chafing at the Blue Dogs' influence*

bring before the House, senior aides said.

"It should be obvious that very little is going to pass in the House that a majority of Blue Dogs do not support," said former Rep. Charles Stenholm, D-Texas, who led the group when he was in Congress and keeps in close contact with House Democrats.

Stenholm opposed Pelosi's 2002 ascension to the ranks of House leadership, believing that she was philosophically too far to the left and dismissive of moderate points of view. Many Blue Dogs and other moderates are still wary of her, they say privately, concerned that Pelosi's liberal views and tendency to side with her mostly left-of-center confidants could earn their party an extremist image that will cost them their seats — and Democrats the majority.

But many now also say that Pelosi is bowing to the political realities that landed her in her post.

"The country has moved to the center. Nancy understands that, and she listens to the Blue Dogs, and I take a lot of comfort in that," Stenholm said.

Blue Dogs — with their right-of-center views, conservative districts and hawkish tendencies — share a more natural rapport with

Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., who they see as their most prominent advocate in leadership.

Still, they say Pelosi has made an effort to include them — a testament to the group's political importance. She awarded members of the coalition some plum committee spots and stays in regular contact with them.

"She has her point of view and we know that, but she has also been willing to listen and to reach out," said Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Calif., a member of the coalition. "We are playing a role in trying to moderate the policies the party puts forward."

The group's clout lies in its numbers and its reach into

competitive districts that proved crucial to Democrats' victory last November. With just a 32-seat majority in the House, Democrats can't afford to alienate their conservative flank.

The more sizable liberal wing of the party is chafing at the Blue Dogs' influence.

Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif., a member of the "Out of Iraq" caucus that favors forcing an end to the war, complained in a recent Web interview that Blue Dogs

"are bragging that they have nine new members."

In the interview with the liberal group Progressive Democrats of America, she pointed out that the Progressive Caucus can boast the same number of freshmen.